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MEMORIAL

OF

REV. WILLIAM H. WILLS, D. D.

By Revd John L. Michaux
of Greensboro, N. C.

REV. WM. H. WILLS, D. D.

When men of eminent piety, large influence and extensive usefulness, who have served their generation by the will of God, fall on sleep and are gathered home to their reward, those who knew them best and enjoyed the fairest opportunities for making a just estimate of their worth, seem to have laid on them an obligation to the living to put on record at least a brief sketch of the virtuous lives thus closed up for ever. It is with such impressions as these that we write of the late Rev. William H. Wills, D. D, a superannuated minister of the North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, who was born on the 4th day of August, 1809, and died June 22nd, 1889, in his 80th year.

[The committee appointed to write this obituary was constituted of Dr. A. C. Harris and J L. Michaux, but the health of Dr. Harris, who has himself since gone home, being feeble, he authorized his associate in this tribute to proceed with the task, which he has done under numerous difficulties, one of which has been to select from a large mass of facts which seemed essential to the subject a bulk not too great for a newspaper memoir. This difficulty has cramped the hand and perplexed the mind of the writer, since the part enacted by Dr. Wills in the history of the church in North Carolina from 1831 to 1884 connects his name with the most interesting events of that history.]

Dr. Wills became a member of the church at Whitaker's Chapel in 1830, and was licensed to preach April 18th, 1831. He preached his first sermon in old Hebron church, Edgecombe county, on the 4th Sunday in May, 1831. The annual conference of March 17, 1831, at Rehoboth, Granville county, had already ordered, prior to the date of his license, that young Bro. Wills should be employed by the President should that officer think proper. He was Secretary of the Conference of 1832, held in Raleigh and was returned to Roanoke as assistant to Rev. John F. Speight. At the Conference of 1833, at Whitaker's Chapel, he was a lay delegate and Secretary to the body, was elected to deacon's orders and ordained, and assigned to Granville circuit as Superintendent. From the Conference at Mount Hermon, he was sent as assistant on Roanoke circuit, the engagement to end Oct 1st, of that year. He was absent from the conference of 1835, held at Rehoboth, but was recommended for elders' orders and was placed on the district committee as an unstationed minister. On the 13th of May, 1835, he was married to Miss Anna M., daughter of Dr. Carey Whitaker, of Halifax county, who, with seven of the nine children born to them, still survives, treasuring the precious memories of a married life extending over the period of fifty-four years, "and looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ." The eldest son is Rev. R. H. Wills, the President of this Conference, and a regular itinerant for about thirty years.

The name of W. H. Wills does not appear on the roll of the Conference of 1836, held at Sandy Ridge, Guilford county, but he was placed on the district committee and enrolled as an unstationed minister on Roanoke circuit. The minutes for '37, at Shiloh, '38 at Rehoboth, '39 at Salem, Orange county, '40, at Fair Grove, report him as unstationed. There was no conference in '41, on account of the fact that the conference of '40 occurred on the 4th of December and the next conference was held February 18th, 1842. There were two conferences in '42, the second one being December the 2nd. For these years, and until '44 Bro. Wills was reported "unstationed," but in the latter year he was received into conference by vote and enrolled as a member. He had been employed by the President, with the unanimous vote of the quarterly conference, early in 1844, to supply the place on Roanoke circuit made vacant by the resignation of Rev. Wm. Lineberry. He was present at the Fairfield Conference in 1844, was chairman of the Boundaries' Commit-

2259

tee, and was assigned as an assistant on Roanoke circuit, and at the conference of 1845, held at Whitaker's Chapel, he was returned as an assistant on Roanoke circuit, and was elected to and attended the general conference of May, 1846, at Cincinnati. He started to the Mount Hermon conference of 1847, but an accident on the way, not serious in itself, influenced him to return home. This conference assigned him as an assistant on Roanoke circuit.

It was during 1848 that the more aggressive ministerial career of our brother began. During all the previous years there were not only enough preachers to fill all the appointments, but some of the circuits had their superintendents and as many as five or six assistants, some of them necessarily only partially engaged in the work. Roanoke, for example, in 1845, reported, "Caswell Drake, John F. Speight, Wm. Bellamy, R. Davidson, Wm. H. Wills and G. A. T. Whitaker," ministers, while it also had an unordained traveling assistant, A. C. Harris, and three unstationed ministers and preachers—ten in all. Nor were the surroundings much dissimilar in other parts of the district at that time.

These facts of history will account in large measure for any seeming lack of activity on the part of such a man as Dr. Wills, full of zeal and devotion as he ever was. But, in the summer of 1848, we see him breaking over the environments which had for years circumscribed his activities, and perhaps under more favorable domestic surroundings, starting from his home, full of zeal and ardor, to assist his brethren of the Western circuits in their camp and protracted meetings, At Fogleman's, in Alamance, and Double Springs, in Guilford, his preaching was attended with almost pentecostal power and effectiveness. This remark applies more appropriately to a sermon preached at Double Springs on, "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God," at the close of which a thousand hearers seemed to have been swayed as by a strong wind.

We suggest the thought for what it may be worth, that the great success of this evangelistic excursion to the camp meeting fields of the Western circuits was interpreted by Bro. Wills to indicate his duty to give himself to the work at large; accordingly he is found at the Fair Grove Conference of 1848, where, on the first ballot, he is elected President of the District.

Many worthy and laborious men had preceded him in that office, but he undertook and carried out a more thorough and aggressive plan of circuit visitation, preaching and supervising the work on all the fields of labor, than any one had undertaken to do up to that time reporting, too, in pleasant and attractive vein, for the church periodical the result of his itinerant observations. The notes of travel from his pen during the year 1849, which may be found in the files of the METHODIST PROTESTANT, would be interesting reading at this day. They were productive of great good among the readers of the church paper, and were full of encouragement to both pastors and people. We can recall at this distant day the terms of high appreciation with which he spoke of such men as Rev.'s Alson Gray and John Hinshaw, who were acknowledged as foremost men in piety and zeal in their day. The labors of the President in 1849 were abundant and arduous, but it was manifest that they had effected good in all directions. His report to the Conference of 1849 was the first regular document of the sort from an executive of the district, besides that it contained a setting forth in full of his views as to the condition of the various fields of labor, their susceptibilities and their necessities.

He was re-elected President at the Conference of 1849, and chosen a delegate to the General Conference of 1850. He was again elected President at the Rehoboth Conference of 1850, but early in the next year his health gave way, and the district committee appointed Rev. B. L. Hoskins to fill out the unexpired term. He was able to attend the Conference at Bethel in 1851, and was left without an appointment at his own request. The next year he was assigned to Halifax circuit as assistant. He was Secretary of the Conference of

1853, held at Fairfield, and was assigned to Roanoke circuit as Supt. Next year he was Supt. of Halifax circuit, and was in the same relation for two succeeding years, In 1857 he was assigned to Roanoke circuit as Supt. and was also a delegate to the General Conference of 1858 and at the Annual Conference of '58 was returned to Roanoke circuit. During the year 1860 he was unassigned, but the President, Rev. John F. Speight, having died during this year, Dr. Wills was appointed to fill out his term. He was elected President at the Conference of 1860, but resigned during the session of the Conference, and was appointed Supt. of Tar River circuit, and was returned the next year. From the Conference of 1862 he was assigned to Roanoke, and returned in 1863, and '64 He was not present at the celebrated Fair Grove Conference of 1863, and therefore had nothing to do with the proceedings of the session. By the Conference of 1865 he was assigned to Halifax circuit and elected to the General Conference of 1866, held at Georgetown, D. C., of which he was President. It would be needless to say to those who knew his readiness and skill as a presiding officer, that he discharged the functions of the office with ability and success. On one of the days during the session the General Conference, in a body, called on President Johnson at the White House, Dr. Wills making the address, and President Johnson replying. It is remembered that President Wills was clad in a suit of black home-spun, which had been manufactured out of the raw material, and he said to the occupant of the White House, with evident pride and satisfaction: "Sir, the clothes that I have on are entirely of home production, my wife and daughters having dyed and spun the wool, woven the cloth, cut out the garments and made them with their own hands."

He was reappointed to Halifax circuit by the Conference of 1866, and elected a delegate to the Montgomery Convention for the following year. This convention he attended, and acted an important part in its proceedings. The Conference of 1867 left him without an appointment at his own request, and at the next Conference he was elected President of the district, and re-elected in 1869. In 1870 he was a member of the General Conference, but at the ensuing Annual Conference he was left without an appointment, in consequence of ill health which relation was repeated for '71 and '72. in which latter year the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred on him by the trustees and faculty of Western Maryland College.

In 1873 he was placed on the list of superannuates, which relation was continued in '74 and '75, but in '76 no record is made. The Conference of '75 elected him one of the delegates to the Union Convention of '77, in Baltimore, in which body his firm, conservative position on important questions won for him and his Conference the respect and good will of all. He was, indeed, an important factor in reaching an amicable adjustment between the two divisions of the church represented in that convention.

Dr. Wills and a majority of his Conference had been slow to approve of a proposition which had been for some time pending to reunite what was then known as "the Methodist church," and the Methodist Protestant church, the latter being confined almost entirely to the Southern States, and the propriety and the terms of such union were warmly discussed, but when at last such guarantees as he thought were necessary were proposed, he, as did a majority of his brethren in the South, heartily concurred in the proposed measure, and entered the compact with great heartiness.

The following Annual Conference ('77) appointed him agent of Greensboro Mission; the session of '78 appointed him Conference Evangelist, and at the next session he was appointed to La Grange Mission. In 1880 he was assigned to Tar River circuit and the same year he had been present as a delegate to the Pittsburg General Conference. In '81 and '82 he was assigned to Roanoke, and in '83 to Tar River, with Rev. W. L. Harris associate pas-

tor. Early in '84 he took charge of La Grange Mission to supply a vacancy, and while filling that position with his characteristic energy and faithfulness—going beyond his strength—he was, on the night of Sept. 19th, 1884, at the home of Mrs E. R. Hadley, near La Grange, stricken with paralysis, an affliction which held him in its grasp until June 22nd, 1889, when he passed away.

The late and beloved Rev. A. C. Harris, M. D., a short while before his own death, dictated to an amanuensis a letter to this writer as his tribute to the memory of Dr. Wills, which has now a mournful interest, yet brightened by the thought that the two have already met

"Beyond the sighing and the weeping,"

He writes:

"Bro. Michaux—Our life-long friend and ministerial associate, Rev. W. H. Wills, D.D., has gone before us, having through strength, labor and sorrow, nearly entered upon four-score years.

The perpetuity of life—the life that now is and that which is to come intimately blended—is a pleasing contemplation to them who, by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory, honor and immortality, as they have the promise of eternal life; and this we secure through our Redeemer, God having bestowed His love upon us by the gift of His Son, and we, entering by faith and obedience into His family as heirs and joint heirs with Christ Jesus, are called the sons of God; and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

He now rests from the labors and sorrows of life, both in the grave and in that everlasting rest which remaineth for the people of God.

How blest the righteous when he dies!
When sinks the weary soul to rest!
How mildly beam the closing eyes
How gently heaves the expiring breast!
Life's labor done, as sinks the clay,
Light from its load the spirit flies,
While heaven and earth combine to say,
How blest the righteous when he dies.

Ushered into the divine Presence, and being a partaker of heavenly glories, our brother rests from his labors, and his works do follow him. His labors were abundant, and the governing principle with him was a full conception of duty: and this shaped his course.

The older members of our Conference are on the roll of the dead—Harris, Speight and Wills, whose labors, in the thirties, were mainly in the East, have entered the portals of everlasting glory, in the order named, and, reunited, may, if permitted, recount the toils, labors and pleasures of their intimate association while bearing the yoke in their youth, and exult together in the glory by which they are surrounded. Bethesda, beloved home of our dear brother and father in Israel, has many representatives in the better world. The old, the middle aged and the young are there. Their memory is inscribed indelibly upon our affections, while the reunion will gladden all hearts, and we shall sing—Saved by Grace.

Yours truly,
A. C. Harris.
Sassafras Fork, N. C., Aug. 6, '89.

Thus far we have scarcely done more than present to the reader the dry statistics of time and place and movements in relation to our deceased brother, when he began his career, what positions he filled, and other similar details—only the beginning, really, concerning a life full of instructive and edifying incident.

Dr. Wills' early literary training was limited in its scope, but he had been well instructed in secular business methods, and he was a model in promptness and accuracy in all matters. He always carried a watch, and was careful that it should be an accurate timekeeper. Carelessness in meeting engagements on time always worried him. If he ever failed to reach an Annual or General Conference, or any other

church meeting, in time for its opening, it is not remembered. Such a thing could not occur without an accident. And if he filled an appointment to preach it was generally at the exact time that was announced. In dress he was rigidly plain, and the idea of show seemed never to have entered his mind. Yet he was always scrupulously neat, both in his person and his attire. In respect to what might be termed gossip, he was peculiar. He never related any common occurrences in one place that he had heard in another, and never inquired after the news; yet he was never indifferent to the real welfare of the people, and was ever ready to discuss topics of genuine interest His aversion to gossip may be illustrated by one circumstance: On one occassion he had ridden up to a neighborhood store and had just dismounted when a rather inquisite person came up and accosting him quite familiarly, asked, "What is the news?" The prompt reply was, "Sir, I am no news carrier."

He was fond of his own home and fireside and took great interest in contriving appliances for convenience and comfort; yet we have heard him express the fear lest his earthly home should become so attractive to him that he might be reluctant to leave it when the time came to go. As a husband and father and the head of a family his plans were admirable, and were carried out so skillfully, as shown by their success, that they deserve to be imitated by all, if that were possible How to live "in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation" without contracting evil, is perhaps not a more difficult problem than to so order one's household as not to subject its inmates to assimilation to the families surrounding them; but we have evidence of the fact that one family at least could be "in the world and not of the world," by virtue of obedience to the Divine command to "keep the way of the Lord."

Those who knew and observed Dr. Wills were satisfied of the fact that he was actuated in all his movements, both public and private, by what he believed to be Christian principle. He seemed to have a way marked out before him, and from it he could not be turned aside. We do not mean to say that he never yielded in a matter of opinion, for in this particular he was the reverse of strenuous, and we have often seen him yield to persons whose opinions were entitled to far less respect than his own. The spirit of contention had no place in his heart, and in his long life he was never known to wrangle; as for the retaliatory spirit, that also was foreign to him, as we have had opportunity for testing. We believe the exact truth to be that our departed brother was thoroughly regenerated, and that he acted in obedience to the spirit of grace that was in him.

True, we once heard him say that he had no knowledge of the exact time when he passed from nature to grace, yet he knew that he had undergone the great change and was a new creature in Christ Jesus. Under this blessed consciousness he rejoiced in Christ Jesus and gave glory to God. Often when he ministered to others in the church of God his own soul would take fire and he would be carried away in the excess of joy.

We never met a man who gave clearer evidences of loyalty to God, to conscience, to duty, and to his church, and in these respects he deserves the highest rank. For Christ's sake he loved the church and the souls of perishing men, and for Christ's sake and the salvation of souls he preached and prayed, exhorted and wept through long years of toil and self-sacrificing devotion. We are assured by the voice from heaven that those who die in the Lord are blessed, for the reasons "that they rest from their labors," and "their works do follow them." How blessed then him whom we here commemorate in these lines of tribute, whose labors were so abundant and whose works were so earnest and faithful. How earnestly and tenderly he expounded and applied the vital doctrines of repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and exhorted the church to stand fast, to put on the whole armor of God, to pray without ceasing and to look for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life,

As a preacher he was doctrinal, experimental and practical, always in earnest, and often, especially when in the prime of his manhood, with distinguished ability and effectiveness. He watched for souls as one who must give account, and there are hundreds now living who treasure up the saving words he spoke, and hundreds more who will recall them in seasons yet to come, because they are the words of wisdom and of eternal life.

Dr. Wills was a close student of the Bible, and made it the staple of his excellent sermons. He was also well versed in the economy of his church, clearly comprehended its principles, and was a parliamentarian of decided ability, so that as a presiding officer among us he was preeminent, deciding points of order with readiness and dispatching business with speed. Both as the secretary and the presiding officer of the Conference he always displayed the most complete readiness and skill, and we have heard a number of persons say that they never saw his equal as a chairman. But perhaps he performed his part quite as well and with as much success as a committeeman as in any other relation. His reports were models of point and comprehensiveness.

As a debater he was ready and able, and might have excelled as such, but for the fact that he had no fondness in that direction; and as years increased the disinclination to debate seemed to grow upon him.

The writer, while engaged in preparing this tribute, realizes what he has felt in respect to other deceased brethren, a feeling which grows out of the changed condition from life to death, as to the body, and from embodied to disembodied, as to the spirit. We were once so circumstanced that we could see them and hold converse with them: all is now changed, and the veil of mysterious silence and non intercourse drops down between them and us. And there are some words that we intended to say to them, but while we deferred, the swift, noiseless chariot came down and bore them away.

The death of Dr. Wills was preceded by an affliction of four years and nine months, during much of which time however, he was comparatively comfortable, could move about with crutch, and could be carried from place to place. Only a short while before his death his condition appeared much improved, so as to give hope of an extension of his term, but within four or five days of the Saturday on which he died a change for the worse came on him, and he continued to sink until the end was reached. Thus died God's faithful servant in his 80th year. He was ready, we have no doubt. None who knew him well could doubt it. His preparation had been made long years ago, and he was only waiting

And just here the writer would pause and look back upon the scenes of earlier years when he who is now our glorified brother and friend was in the prime of his mature manhood—in middle age. We recall his intense zeal and earnest labor, his faithful dealing with those to whom he preached, his burning words of exhortation, his devout and touching prayers, and his self-denying devotion in spending and being spent in his Master's service. Even now we seem to hear the words of those hymns which he delighted to sing forty years ago:

"'Tis not a cause of small import
The pastor's care demands,
But what might fill an angel's heart,
And filled the Savior's hands."

Again:

"Do not I love thee, O my Lord?
Behold my heart and see,
And turn each worthless idol out,
That dares to rival Thee."

And again:

"My span of life will soon be done,
The passing moments say,
As length'ning shadows o'er the mead
Proclaim the close of day."

And then, the texts from which he preached, how they come back from the days of the long ago and become vocal in the memory:

"Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free."

But this I say, brethren the time is ort." 'Unto Him that hath loved and washed us from our sins in His n blood."

When we calmly and thoughtfully nsider the character and the labors of . Wills, and bring into review the zorous and uncompromising nature his piety, whose fervid aggressive ss yielded to no circumstances of ne or place, it is then that we wish r all our ministers that they might clothed with the same panoply with ich he fought "the good fight of ith." Can it be that such an example ail be lost on any of us?

Our dear brother, Dr. A. C. Harris, io so soon followed his friend Dr. ills to the grave and to glory, speaks

Bethesda church. Yes, we know ethesda church. The house was built der the inspiration and supervision Dr. Wills, and in it he and his fam- worshipped. It was to him and his d a circle of devout souls a place of asting and refreshment on the march the city of our God. Numbers who ere partook of the Bread of Life and e Water of Life have gone to be with eir Redeemer forever and to praise im with the saints of all ages. One one the worshippers go up and are en no more on earth. We can re- ember when there was one lone grave Bethesda, and that the grave of an fant But now the grounds hold a mber of graves and one of them olds the remains of our departed Bro. Wills.

Some time during last spring one of is neighbors, a pious sister, was taken ery ill, and came very near dying. She allied, however, and as soon as she as sufficiently recovered to do so she aid a visit to her afflicted neighbor, r. Wills, and the two chatted together leasantly concerning matters of mu- ial interest; then said Dr. Wills, turning to his lately afflicted friend, "When I heard of your sickness. and how very ill you were, I began to think you were going to beat me getting to glory." These devoted Christians were so well prepared for their change, that, to them, death and glory were closely associated. And there was a sort of rivalry between them as to which of them should get there first. That question was decided within one week from the day on which the conversation took place, and he, of whom we write, was privileged to win the race and *get there first.*

One incident which occurred in the dying hour will be of interest to those who knew the deceased: The life current was running low, and every little service that promised to soothe the sufferer was resorted to, the patient indicating by gesture whether this or that would be agreeable. Presently one of the attendants suggested a stimulant, and asked him: "Will you have some brandy?" To this he made answer distictly and positively, "No." This was his last word, and perhaps he summoned his whole strength for the effort. It proved most conclusively that his mind was clear to the last.

Thus passed away, full of days, full of honors and full of victory through the blood of the Lamb, a most valiant, faithful, uncompromising soldier of the Cross; a firm, but most affectionate husband and father, and a bond of union and promoter of personal and family religion in Bethesda church, as well as faithful ambassador to men to whom he ministered elsewhere.

God be thanked that He gave us His servant for so many years and that in his removal we have such abundant assurance that he has laid hold on eternal life.

J. L. Michaux, } Com.
A. C. Harris, }

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